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Keep calm and apply to Germany: how online communities mediate transnational student mobility from India to Germany

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws attention to the increasingly central yet understudied role of social media in facilitating student mobility from India. More specifically, it explores the emergence of online mutual-help communities of aspirant student migrants on Facebook and WhatsApp, which are aimed at helping members navigate the process of going abroad for study. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork focused on postgraduate-level student migration from India to Germany, the paper explores how these communities are meeting aspirant student migrants' information and support needs in novel ways. Not only are they a key space in which information on study in Germany is discussed, dissected, and interpreted, they have also resulted in the production of a whole new body of information, tools, and resources on how to navigate the process of going to Germany for a Master's degree. The paper argues that these communities can be seen as democratising access to study abroad, to some extent, by dramatically expanding applicants' social networks and the social capital to which they have access.

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Introduction

This paper draws attention to the increasingly central yet understudied role of social media in facilitating student mobility from India. Qualitative studies on transnational student migration have focused largely on international students' experiences once abroad, exploring a range of topics, including: the intercultural challenges that many international students encounter (Brooks and Waters 2011); their negotiations of their class position (Rutten and Verstappen 2014); the manner in which they form networks of support and friendship in the host country (Gomes et al. 2014; Jones 2013); their use of online/social media to sustain relationships with friends and family in their home countries and elsewhere (Collins 2012a; Gomes et al. 2014); and the immigration policies of host countries and the 'education-migration nexus' (Robertson 2013). Considerably less attention has been paid to the perspectives and experiences of aspirant student migrants, i.e. prospective international students, and the manner in which they strategise and negotiate the process of going abroad to study.

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As scholars like Collins (2012a), Lin (2012), and Fong (2011) have argued, international students are not simply rational, neoliberal subjects whose reason for seeking foreign credentials is the acquisition of social and cultural capital. Rather, transnational student migration is complex and overdetermined, is not always entirely calculated, and is mediated by a complex ‘infrastructure’ (Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012) composed of a number of diverse and sometimes interlinked actors, networks, and technologies. Recent studies have drawn attention to how various components of this infrastructure mediate student mobility. For instance, scholars have examined the pivotal role played by education agents (Collins 2012b; Thieme 2017), and have also explored how kinship, social and peer networks facilitate student migration by acting as important sources of information and guidance, and by contributing to the creation of cultures of mobility (Beech 2015; Brooks and Waters 2010; Collins 2008). However, with a few notable exceptions (Collins 2012a), the increasingly important role of online media and social media in facilitating student mobility has received only passing mention in existing research on student migration.

Whole new migration infrastructures are being created through platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube, and contemporary transnational student mobility cannot be understood without a study of these developments. This paper will examine how Indians aspiring to study for a Master’s degree in Germany – previously unknown to each other – are connecting with each other by means of Facebook and WhatsApp groups and supporting each other through the application process. I will explore how these groups operated, drawing on Etienne Wenger’s framework of ‘communities of practice’ (2004, 2006). Building on his work with Jean Lave (1991), on apprenticeships as a learning model, Wenger defines communities of practice as being groups with three features: (1) domain: a shared domain of interest, which may or may not be recognised as expertise outside the community; (2) community: members who interact, share information, help each other, and learn together; and (3) practice: a shared repertoire of resources such as experiences, stories, and tools and techniques of solving common problems (2006, 1–2). I will argue that the Facebook and WhatsApp groups I studied constitute communities of practice, and are transforming aspirant student migrants’ social networks, increasing their social capital, and changing the way the process of going abroad for study is planned and navigated.

Apart from offering an in-depth case study of how social media platforms are conditioning student mobility from India, the second largest source of international students after China (UIS 2019), the research will also intervene in the emerging scholarship on social media and mobility. In this latter body of scholarship, studies have focused mainly on the important role of social media in helping transnational families manage long-distance relationships and in helping migrants remain in contact with their social network back home (Komito 2011; Madianou and Miller 2012; Sinanan 2017). However, there is a dearth of research that has ethnographically explored how social media might more directly inform mobilities, i.e. how it might be used by aspirant migrants to plan their migration.

The small number of studies which have considered the role of online media and social media in crafting mobility have rightly drawn attention to how the use of such media can significantly expand aspirant migrants’ networks beyond their close contacts or ‘strong ties’ (Beech 2015; Collins 2012a; Dekker and Engbersen 2012; Dekker, Engbersen, and Faber 2016; Hiller and Franz 2004). These studies have discussed how such media

allow aspirant migrants to not just re-connect with ‘weak ties’ or distant acquaintances, but also to establish contact with ‘latent ties’ or people previously unknown to them, who have information regarding the target destination or how to organise migration. Weak ties and latent ties are seen as particularly valuable for organising migration as they typically provide aspirant migrants access to types of information and pools of contacts not available through their existing social networks (Granovetter 1973). However, despite highlighting the potential of latent ties activated through online media to substantially increase the social capital of an aspirant migrant, existing research has largely portrayed the impact of such ties on the facilitation of migration as being limited. For instance, Dekker Engbersen, and Faber argue that:

Online communication in migration networks mainly concerns information that is exchanged amongst existing social ties. [...] latent ties that became available through the emergence of online media are only a small part of all online transnational communication in migration networks. This suggests that online media are not (yet) substantially changing the social capital and information that is available to prospective migrants. Claims about online media spurring international migration are thus premature. (2016, 549–550)

The findings of my paper differ in three ways from existing understandings of how social media informs mobility. First, it offers a case study of how latent ties activated through social media are playing a key role in facilitating transnational student mobility. Second, existing research has tended to assume that the weak and latent ties valuable for planning migration are always previous migrants in the target destination. This paper presents a case study of how *aspirant* student migrants – previously unknown to each other and living in different parts of India – were able to meet each other’s information and support needs in novel ways. Third, it presents a new and thus far unstudied format of mutual-support and information exchange aimed at organising transnational migration. Compared to the information exchange on discussion boards, periodic exchanges on online expat groups on websites such as Facebook, Orkut or Daum, or one-to-one exchanges on websites such as Facebook, LinkedIn or Cyworld, which have been described in scholarship so far, the Facebook and WhatsApp groups on which this paper focuses were the site of a sustained collaboration between regularly interacting members. Or, to use Wenger’s term, these groups were communities of practice.

Before embarking on an exploration of how these groups operated, I will outline the fieldwork on which this paper is based, and also examine how existing social networks and commercially-run education consultancies were implicated in my interlocutors’ application journeys.

Fieldwork

With Indian student numbers in Germany having almost doubled in the last five years, India is now the second largest source of international students to Germany at the tertiary level (DAAD 2018). Seventy per cent of Indian students in Germany are enrolled on Engineering courses, and seventy-four per cent are male (DAAD 2018). As I will outline below, these broader trends were reflected in my fieldwork.¹

This paper draws on fieldwork conducted between November 2017 and April 2018. The first component of the fieldwork comprised non-participant observation in a sample of the

many ‘Study in Germany’ Facebook groups and WhatsApp groups, which have proliferated over the last two to three years. These groups were composed largely of Indians interested in Engineering Master’s courses, and as a result much of the information circulating in these groups centred on Engineering courses. While there were women present in all these groups, the majority of members were male.

I observed the daily activity in four Facebook and fifteen WhatsApp groups, after obtaining permission from the group administrators. In requesting permission, I was clear about the nature of my research and how my observation of the group activity would contribute to it. I did not participate in the conversations that took place in the groups, but rather observed them and wrote fieldnotes and took screenshots. In the WhatsApp groups, I was contacted by a number of group members through private messages, who – upon seeing my German phone number – thought that I was an Indian student in Germany who might have useful information about study in Germany. I used these chances to tell these group members about my research, and made it very clear that I had no information about Master’s courses in Germany. Some of these people were interested in telling me about their own application journeys, and we had regular conversations via WhatsApp text messages. It would not have been possible to ensure that every group member was aware of my presence in the groups, not least because new members were always joining, and information posted in the group might not be seen by all members.

The second component of the fieldwork comprised semi-structured interviews with forty-five Indians: applicants to German universities,² Master’s students enrolled in seventeen universities across Germany, and recent graduates of German universities. I recruited these interviewees through the social media groups, visits to universities, participation in social events run by Indian student associations, and snowball sampling. Thirty-seven of the interviews were conducted in person, and eight via Skype. Interviews explored, among other things, how people had navigated or were navigating the process of coming to study in Germany. Of the people interviewed, thirty-seven were Engineering students or graduates, two were enrolled on Management courses, one was studying for a Master’s in Physics, and five were in the process of applying to Engineering courses. Only seven people in the sample were female.

Fieldnotes, interview transcripts and screenshots of group activity were analysed using ATLAS.ti. In this article, the term ‘interlocutors’ refers to the people I interviewed, as well as aspirant student migrants in the social media groups whose conversations I observed, or with whom I had informal conversations. Pseudonyms have been used to protect my interlocutors’ identities.

Learning to move

The vast majority of my interlocutors perceived the process of organising to go abroad for study as complicated and stressful. My interlocutors came from across India, and included people who were from metropolitan cities, smaller cities and towns, and villages. Although everyone described themselves as coming from ‘middle-class’ families, there was a lot of variation in socio-economic backgrounds. The majority said that the affordable education offered by Germany was what had made it possible for them to consider studying abroad, and it would have been difficult for them to study in countries like the US or Australia; they had not seen study abroad as an anticipated part of their trajectories.

Most did not have people in their existing social networks who could help them navigate the application process. Although many described their parents as providing moral support and roughly half also described them as providing financial support, almost all said that their parents did not know enough about their field of study and higher education abroad to provide assistance beyond this. About a quarter had relatives, 'seniors' (people who had been in the years above them during their schooling or Bachelor's degree), and former classmates and colleagues who were studying in Germany, or had graduated from a German university, although in many cases these were distant acquaintances. Only a handful told me that these friends or relatives had been deeply involved in guiding them through the application process; most instead described exchanging a few messages or a Skype call with their known contacts in Germany. These exchanges were described as being very helpful in gaining an insight into higher education in Germany, the international student experience, and the application process. However, they felt that they required continual support with the application process, which these persons couldn't be expected to provide. Furthermore, a large proportion of my interlocutors' confusions centred around the minutia of the application process. Even the most well-intentioned friends or relatives with study abroad experience – unless they had just finished a similar application process themselves – were unlikely to be familiar with these technicalities or have up-to-date information at their fingertips.

Commercially-run education consultancies have long been viewed in India as an important source of guidance on how to go abroad for study. Fifteen of my interlocutors had applied or were applying to German universities using the services of an education consultancy, and another six had visited anywhere between two and ten consultants for a free initial consultancy session. Education consultants typically support their clients through the entire application process, from university shortlisting to applying for one's visa (Jayadeva 2016). Many consultancies have partnerships with foreign universities in 'traditional' destination countries for Indian students such as the US, UK, and Australia, and increasingly also in countries such as Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland, which are working hard to attract international students (Jayadeva 2016). Because consultancies earn a commission from their partner universities for every student who enrolls at the university through them – usually a percentage of the student's university fee – they are able to offer their services to aspirant student migrants for free (Jayadeva 2016). In interviews and informal conversations with my interlocutors, I often encountered the view that a person had a better chance of getting admission in a foreign university if they applied through a consultancy which partnered with it. Nevertheless, the reputation of consultancies is mixed and, among my interlocutors, narratives of commercially-driven consultancies which put their business interests above students' interests abounded.

Consultants were discussed by my interlocutors as being particularly unreliable when it came to study in Germany. Given that they offer free education, German state-funded universities – which constitute the majority of the country's higher education provision – understandably don't enter into partnerships with consultancies (Jayadeva 2016). For aspirants, this means that not only do consultants charge clients applying to German universities, but also that many have limited information about German universities and application processes (compared to the information they have about the higher education institutions they partner with). Furthermore, a consultancy which has partnerships with fee-paying universities in other countries has little incentive to recommend Germany to

a client, because the commission they receive from their partner universities far exceeds what they can charge a client interested in applying to a German university (Jayadeva 2016). Indeed, some of my interlocutors complained that consultants had tried to discourage them from going to Germany, and had recommended the USA, or even Poland or Latvia instead. As a result, most of my interlocutors who were using the services of a consultant felt they could not completely trust or rely on the consultant.

It was against this background that, over the last two to three years, ‘Study in Germany’ Facebook and WhatsApp groups have come to be viewed as an important tool and resource for navigating the process of going to Germany for study. The majority of my interlocutors, regardless of whether they had people in their existing social networks in Germany, or whether they were using or had been using the services of a consultant, had participated in these social media groups. Most of my interlocutors who were studying in Germany at the time I interviewed them had met almost all of their Indian classmates through the groups prior to arriving in Germany.

‘Study in Germany’ Facebook and WhatsApp groups: communities of practice

In this section, I will illustrate how these groups exhibited the three features of ‘communities of practice’ as outlined by Wenger (2006): domain, practice, and community. In doing so, I will demonstrate how these groups mediated student mobility from India to Germany.

Domain

Navigating successfully the process of going to study in Germany was the ‘shared domain of interest’ (Wenger 2006) that brought together the members of the Facebook and WhatsApp groups. At the time of my fieldwork, there were several large Facebook groups (the largest had 50,000 members), most of which had been created by Indians currently studying in Germany or Indian graduates of German universities, to support future applicants. With names like ‘MS in Germany’ or ‘Indian students in Germany’, the Facebook groups were quite broad in terms of focus, bringing together all Indians interested in studying in Germany. While not all members appeared to be active participants, each group had hundreds of active members (who posted or responded to other members’ posts). The vast majority of these active members were aspirants, but there were also a small number of ‘seniors’ – Indians who were currently studying in Germany or had graduated from a German university – who regularly posted or responded to other’s posts. Members used the Facebook groups to post questions and have discussions on all topics pertaining to study in Germany. Through posting one’s question on a Facebook group, one could solicit the views of a large number of people. Indeed, it was not uncommon for a member’s question to receive 50–100 responses.

The Facebook groups were a gateway to the significantly greater number of specialised WhatsApp groups (many of which had 257 members, the maximum limit for a WhatsApp group). There were WhatsApp groups based on discipline (e.g. ‘MS in Civil Engineering’), on target university (e.g. ‘University of Stuttgart aspirants’), on specific courses at specific universities (e.g. ‘Computer Science at Technical University Berlin’), groups specifically

for people who already had an admission letter from a particular university (e.g. 'University of Siegen Mechatronics admits'), as well as groups for people who wanted to discuss all things visa-related (e.g. 'visa interview practice') or plan their travel (e.g. 'Flying to Germany'). All such groups might have sub-groups based on city or state of residence in India (e.g. 'University of Stuttgart admits – Bangalore'). Most of the WhatsApp groups were created by aspirants themselves in order to connect with specific groups of fellow aspirants. The WhatsApp groups were significantly more active than the Facebook groups, with hundreds of messages being exchanged every day. People used the Facebook groups to publicise WhatsApp groups they had created, posting the links to these groups so those interested could join. People also inquired on the Facebook groups about whether a specific WhatsApp group already existed. My interlocutors were typically members of one or two Facebook groups, as well as a handful of WhatsApp groups.

At the start of my fieldwork, I was confused at the popularity of these groups. I wondered whether aspirants wouldn't be able to find more accurate information more easily if they just visited the websites of universities, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), and the German consulate, instead of seeking assistance from other applicants. However, as my fieldwork progressed, I understood that the value of the groups stemmed from the fact that they did not just serve as a space where people could get answers to their questions. Rather, these groups were used and experienced as co-working spaces of sorts, in which aspirants could actively collaborate on the application process, and be part of a community which offered guidance and encouragement at every step.

Exchanges in the groups revolved around a number of topics, including the pros and cons of Germany versus other study destinations; the different types of universities in Germany; the admission requirements and curriculums of various courses, and their employment outcomes; how to shortlist which courses to apply to; part-time job opportunities and the cost of living in different German cities; visa policies; German language requirements; and fears of racism in Germany. The preparation of application documents – from what to write in specific fields of university and visa application forms to where to obtain certain supporting documents – was also a major focus. In these groups, information about the German higher education system and technicalities of the application process became an expertise that people sought, cultivated, shared, and sometimes even tried to sell or buy.

The WhatsApp groups were the site of the bulk of application-related discussions and co-work. My interlocutors described the WhatsApp groups as being more intimate, informal, and marked by a sense of community than the Facebook groups, and also better suited to everyday application-related co-work. In doing so, they typically made reference to the technical affordances of WhatsApp as well as their wider media habits. Participating in a WhatsApp group was experienced by my interlocutors – most of whom accessed the groups through a smartphone – as more convenient than participating in a Facebook group. People also said that asking a question on Facebook required one to 'write a full post', which was seen as involving some effort. In the WhatsApp groups, on the other hand, one could write multiple short and quick messages. The near synchronous communication enabled by WhatsApp allowed group members to maintain an 'ambient co-presence' (Madianou 2016), which made them feel more closely connected with other members. The relatively small size of the WhatsApp groups added to the feeling of intimacy. Finally, many of my interlocutors told me that they were 'not Facebook people'.

They didn't even have the Facebook app installed on their phone, and it just felt more instinctive to use WhatsApp. The majority of my interlocutors said that they spent most of their time in the WhatsApp groups and visited the Facebook group when they wanted to solicit the views of a large number of people – perhaps including seniors – on a particular topic, or when they had a question for which they could not find an answer within their WhatsApp groups. People would also do a reconnaissance of the Facebook groups from time to time to see if there was any information which could be useful for them.

Given the 'domain' of these groups it made sense that the majority of active members were aspirant student migrants. No longer being involved in the work of applying made all the exchanges in the group seem largely uninteresting and irrelevant to those who were past the 'applicant phase' of their journey. Many of my interlocutors – who were studying in Germany at the time I met them – told me that they had left the WhatsApp groups of which they had been a part soon after settling down in Germany because there was too much activity, and people asked 'silly questions' again and again (although they readily recognised that these very questions had felt important when they were applicants themselves). Most did not leave the Facebook groups – because the activity in these groups was easy to ignore – but simply stopped visiting these groups, or visited them irregularly.

Practice

Here I will discuss how the groups had created a valuable communicative space that had not existed previously, through which a shared practice i.e. 'a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems' (Wenger 2006, 2) had evolved.

The groups brought together people with different levels of experience in the application process. German universities have two intakes every year: a summer and a winter intake. As a result, the groups were always populated by members with different levels of experience with the application process. As one set of members were receiving admission letters, visas, applying for loans, and flying to Germany, another set of members were wrapping their heads around what was involved in applying to German universities and trying to decide whether they wanted to study in Germany in the first place. Members more advanced in the application process, whom I will here call Applicant Veterans, were thus an important source of support and guidance for those who were less experienced, whom I will call Applicant Freshers. Over time, Applicant Veterans would 'graduate' from the groups, many Applicant Freshers would develop into Veterans, and new Applicant Freshers would enter the groups. The groups also brought together people with 'high profiles' and 'low profiles' (the term 'profile' was used to refer to a person's scores in their Bachelor's degree and relevant research/work experience), people from top universities and people from largely non-prestigious ones, people from different parts of India and from both rural and urban backgrounds, and people with varying levels of work experience. The groups thus created the possibility of being in dialogue with specific kinds of people with whom they would not have ordinarily had a chance to communicate on a regular basis.

Activity in the groups was almost constant: members asked questions, offered answers, exchanged notes, shared exciting discoveries, dispensed advice and warnings, and

celebrated and commiserated with each other. In the course of this activity, a variety of systems and practices had evolved with regard to information sharing between members. I will now discuss how different types of information had become available to group members through these practices:

- (1) Information that is available online, but can be accessed more efficiently and easily through the groups:

Being a member of the groups could save an applicant a lot of time and stress, by allowing him/her to build on the experience of fellow applicants. Group members helped each other navigate the large amount of information pertaining to study in Germany available online by pointing each other in the direction of the information for which they were searching. In response to a question asked, group members would often post a screenshot of a particular section of a website or relevant exchanges on Facebook or WhatsApp groups, which offered the information which the inquirer was seeking. Members also readily shared information that they had compiled from different sources. For instance, shortlisting universities and courses that matched one's interests, previous study, and future plans, and keeping track of application deadlines, eligibility criteria, and application requirements was seen as an important yet time-consuming task. Some members had invested time in compiling spreadsheets of all the courses available in a particular discipline ('Mechanical Engineering courses – Winter 2018'), complete with deadlines and other relevant details, and shared links to these spreadsheets with their groups. Some groups even jointly curated such spreadsheets. Certain group members, because of their own research and the amount of time they had spent in the groups, knew a lot of this information by heart. On several occasions I witnessed people post inquiries in the groups, such as: 'Which universities don't have an application fee?', 'Which universities don't ask for documents to be submitted by post?', and these more experienced members would reel off a list of courses in each of these categories, information that would have otherwise required a painstaking search through a number of university websites to collate. Through such exchanges people sometimes discovered courses about which they had not known, or for which they had not realised they were eligible to apply. In a similar way, people also shared information about visas, loans, banks, and travel.

- (1) Information that would have been less straightforward to find:

The groups helped people access information and support that would have been less straightforward to access otherwise. For instance, filling out university and visa application forms typically raised confusions and questions, the answers to which were not always easily locatable on the internet (in many cases, the terminology used was unfamiliar to my interlocutors). Members would post screenshots of their applications, with questions such as, 'What do I write here?' or 'Which option should I choose?' Members also helped each other identify how to go about obtaining or preparing supporting documents. Queries like these were common:

Anyone from VTU university [in India]?? Just a small query, do you apply for the transcripts through your college, or do you apply for it directly from the VTU website???

I stay in Malleshwaram [a neighbourhood] in Bangalore. Anyone knows a notary here where I can get my docs notarised? How much will it cost?

Through the groups, a person could usually connect with one or more other applicants who had such 'local' information. On one occasion, a group member frantically asked: 'Guys, I'm in the notary. This is the stamp the lawyer put on my documents. Is it correct? Please tell fast'. The message was accompanied by an image of a document that had just been stamped. In a few minutes, another member sent an image of one of his own notarised documents, and the message: 'No bro, that's wrong. This is how it's supposed to look'.

Group members who had written to a university or consulate, to seek information or clarification, would send screenshots of this communication to the group, either as a way of answering another member's question ('I actually checked with TU [Technical University] Munich about this. Here is the email from them'), or simply to share information that others might find useful. Group members would sometimes nominate one person among them to write to a university or consulate, or visit a DAAD office, with questions that a number of people in the group had. Many members did not have access to a DAAD office (there were offices only in four Indian cities), and some were nervous about writing directly to a German university or consulate, feeling that they would be unable to articulate clearly their question in writing. For these members, the possibility of having someone else ask questions on their behalf was invaluable. Similarly, those group members who had friends or relatives with experience of study in Germany would share information they had received from these people, or ask them questions on behalf of others in the group. In this way, the social capital that some group members possessed through their social networks outside the groups, could become at least partly accessible to the rest of the group.

(1) Information that would not have been available to an applicant previously:

Through the groups, members could gain insight into admission patterns and trends, and also get detailed accounts from numerous applicants about their experiences with different steps of the application process – information to which they would have otherwise not had access, even through education consultants:

Trends: The presence of a large number of applicants in the groups, who were at different stages of the application process, helped group members get insight into admission patterns and trends, and evaluate their own chances of getting admission to various courses. Members readily shared their 'profiles' with each other – by way of introduction, or in order to provide context when asking a question. In most groups there was a convention that once a person got an admission or rejection letter, they would immediately announce it to the group (sometimes even posting a screenshot of the letter), along with the details of their profile and the date on which they had applied. My interlocutors would study the groups to see at which universities and to which courses people with similar profiles had got admissions and where they had been rejected. Group members would also ask others in the group to 'evaluate' their profiles and help them understand the selection criteria of German universities. Requests like these were common:

Guys, my profile: B.Tech [Bachelor's degree] Electrical Engineering, 8.6 CGPA, IELTS 6, 6–7 electrical projects, 2 internships. Do you think I have a chance in Germany? I would like to

apply to Uni Stuttgart, TU Munich, TU Hamburg, is it feasible? Or can you suggest some safe universities for me [where I have a good chance of getting admission]?

Do colleges take into account work experience? If I have worked in IT for 5 years, but have a B.Tech in Chemical Engineering, can I apply for an IT course?

Do universities go only by CGPA, or do they look at the whole package: work experience, SOP [Statement of Purpose], LORs [Letter of Recommendation], GRE [Graduate Record Examinations] ... ?

My IELTS score is 6. Is the score too low? Should I retake the exam?

More experienced group members would often offer their views based on the patterns they had observed with other group members thus far. What is significant about this ‘profile evaluation’ – whether ‘self-evaluation’ or evaluation by other members – which took place in the groups was not that people had figured out how to accurately predict where they would get admission, but rather that interactions in the groups had a major impact on people’s application strategies.

In addition, because members would immediately inform the group of all important updates in their application process, e.g. a decision on a university or visa application, also providing details of when the application had been submitted, others were able to keep track of how long different universities or consulates were taking to evaluate the applications they received, and plan accordingly.

Personal experiences: Members shared detailed accounts of their experiences at various key points of the application process. For instance, attending a visa interview was a task that many found stressful. A group member who had just attended a visa interview would write a long description of his/her experience and share it with the rest of the group. It was not uncommon for people to write a line-by-line recap of the entire exchange that had taken place between them and the visa officer. Other members would analyse the question that had been asked, the answers which had been provided and how these answers had been received by the visa officer. Alternate answers would be discussed. Ritika reflected: ‘From the Visa WhatsApp group we got a lot of information ... we came to know which visa officer is strict, which one is kind [laughs]’. Ritika’s observation helps show how, through participation in the groups, an applicant could feel well-rehearsed before events which were experienced as being stressful and important. People also discussed tests they needed to take (the GRE, English and German language tests), the process of obtaining a loan, and so on, in similar detail. ‘The groups mentally prepared me for each step of the process’, Shehzad told me. ‘Nothing was a surprise. I was prepared for everything. Because I had already walked down this road so many times through reading other people’s accounts’.

A large body of information, knowledge, resources, experiences, and guidance was thus being generated on the groups, by applicants and some seniors. Members learnt a lot by spending time in the groups: they witnessed hundreds of questions being asked and answered and discussion upon discussion unfold. They also had a chance to operationalise and demonstrate their own knowledge. The active members of the group served as the memory of the group, in a sense: through spending time in the groups they had a keen sense of which member had expertise or recent experience with what topic, and the discussions that had taken place on various topics in different groups.

Community

In this section, I will illustrate how the Facebook and WhatsApp groups I studied contributed to the creation of not just an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983) of aspirant student migrants interested in going to Germany, but also a close-knit community of collaborators who ‘help each other, share information [...] interact and learn together’ (Wenger 2006, 1).

My interlocutors were typically members of one or two Facebook groups, as well as a handful of WhatsApp groups. Members’ participation in their groups varied. While some people reported ‘muting’ the groups and visiting them only in order to ask a question, there were many others who conscientiously read through all the exchanges, and regularly asked questions and/or contributed answers. ‘Before I go to sleep I just go through all the WhatsApp groups and gather the information’, Vishnu, who worked a full-time job, told me. ‘I keep checking my phone even during the day, so if anybody asks a question and I know the answer then I’ll reply. 24/7 I’ll be available in the groups’. Like Vishnu, many of the groups’ most active members were studying or working full-time (although some were taking a ‘gap year’ to apply to universities), and would pop in and out of conversations as their schedules permitted. Conversations in the group were punctuated by messages such as: ‘Gotta go bro, have meeting’, ‘going 4 dinner, see u after 10pm’, ‘Can’t type more now ... TL [team leader] here’. Because the schedules of the different group members varied, the groups seldom slept. Being a member of the WhatsApp groups, for many of my interlocutors, thus felt like having a team of allies who were available around the clock. Group members used the word ‘community’ and even ‘family’ to refer to their group, and often used kinship terms in English and Indian languages to refer to each other (‘bro’, ‘sis’, ‘bhai’, ‘anna’, ‘akka’).

One of the most striking dynamics of the groups for me was the ethic of encouragement and support that characterised them. Even when they were direct competitors, group members appeared to view each other as allies. People admired each other’s profiles, and celebrated each other’s victories. When a group member with an impressive profile announced that he had received yet another admission letter, there would be a flurry of congratulatory messages (‘Wait, is this admission letter number 10!? You are a legend, bro!’). People with multiple offer letters would inform those universities whose offers they were not going to accept as quickly as possible so that ‘others on the waiting list will have a chance’. As described in the previous section, group members readily shared information with each other, including information which they had spent a lot of time and effort in sourcing or compiling. My interlocutors themselves described having been surprised at how helpful absolute strangers in the groups had been to them. Gopal reflected: ‘they are [...] replying very nicely. Not showing attitude or anything. [...] Like how a close friend would respond. They are so helpful. Whenever I message them, they will just give immediate response to me’.

In interviews and informal conversations with me, and in exchanges with each other, members typically presented their contributions to the group as being driven by the desire to ‘give back to the group’ or ‘return the favour’. They regularly brushed off each other’s thank yous by saying that others had helped them too.

Amar: My referee didn’t sign across the sealed envelope. Will my reference still be considered?

Vikram: Don't worry – it's not a problem at all.

Amar: Much relieved. thanks a lot brother :) Sorry for bothering again and again with silly doubts.

Vikram: Hey guys ... its all my pleasure ... been through it and I knw sometimes we get silly doubts but all you need is satisfaction of your own mind ... even I had these doubts in my mind when i applied ... and somebody cleared them for me ... so i am just carrying the legacy.

Many of my interlocutors also expressed pride and wonder at having been part of a novel system of information sharing that was driven by people's kindness and generosity. The idea of Indians going out of their ways to help each other was one that appealed to many, and they were keen to contribute to keeping the system going.

In addition, having a tangible sense of a large and receptive audience – both people whom they knew through the groups, as well as an imagined community of aspirant student migrants which the groups helped to create – made members interested in sharing information, whether in the form of a few comments in response to another applicant's questions, or in the form of a longer post on Facebook or WhatsApp, or even a YouTube video. My interlocutors enjoyed the fact that the expertise that they had acquired, and were acquiring, in the course of their own application journeys had tremendous exchange value in the groups: gratitude and recognition from other members.

While people with 'high profiles' were respected, people who were well-informed about the nitty-gritty of the application process and actively contributed to the groups were the most sought after and popular, whether or not they had high profiles. In each of the groups I studied, there were several such members who had come to be seen as community elders and application gurus, even though many of them had low profiles. Academic knowledge and knowledge of the application process were seen as two separate and unrelated things. For instance, Karan and Avinash – neither of whom had a particularly impressive profile – were regularly appreciated by group members for their extensive knowledge of the application process. After Karan had answered a series of questions one day, one group member wrote: 'In Football we have Lionel Messi as goat [Greatest Of All Time], in cricket we had Sachin Tendulkar as goat, in Germany education we have Karan sir as goat'. Similarly:

Vishnu: @Avinash I donno [if] god is there or not ... but he [Avinash] is there to help us.

Avinash: Anytime Bro. to help you guys.

Karan: I am 24 hrs active, even in personal [time]. don't hesitate to ask for help.

People were praised not just for sharing useful information, but also for being patient, encouraging and generous with time and information. According to Vishnu, had it not been for Avinash's encouragement, he would have given up half way through his application journey and gone back to working in a software company. In a message of thanks to Avinash, Vishnu posted in a WhatsApp group: 'I was about to take my resignation back ... I told to my manager too ... he was very happy at that time ... after msging [Avinash] only ... I got one hope. [...] love you bro'.

Watching people being admired and appreciated for their knowledge or their helpfulness also contributed to other members becoming not just askers of questions but also answerers, not just content consumers but content producers. People took pains to write down their experiences and advice in as much detail and as helpfully as possible, and felt proud when their responses were shared by others and travelled through

conversations. Some volunteered to act as ‘admins’ for Facebook and WhatsApp groups, and actively monitored the groups, answering questions whenever possible and ensuring that anyone who posted irrelevant content was blocked.

While ‘weak ties’ are described in scholarship as being more useful than ‘strong ties’ in terms of the information they can make available to a prospective migrant, they are also portrayed as being less trustworthy and reliable (Dekker and Engbersen 2012). How could people trust information they received from relative strangers? Although time spent in the groups witnessing people support each other led to a certain level of trust in the good intentions of group members, people were cautious in how they dealt with the information they received through the groups. Typically, a question posed to the group elicited a number of responses. When many people replied with similar answers, the inquirer (and other group members who were reading) were more likely to take on board the information shared. Group members would often corroborate their answers with screenshots of websites where the information had been found, or screenshots of communication they had received from a university or consulate. When in doubt, members were usually careful to preface information they shared with disclaimers such as ‘As far as I know ...’, ‘Please check with others too ...’. Other members would then jump in to corroborate or disagree. Group members who had gained a reputation of being well informed would be ‘tagged’ and consulted in some cases (‘@Avinash can you pls confirm this is correct?’). The fact that exchanges in the groups were viewed by many people also functioned as a safety check of sorts. For instance, although I witnessed several cases where a group member provided inaccurate information, because this information was seen by the rest of the group, almost always someone else would jump in and point this out.

Over time, many group members got to know each other very well. Active members were aware of each other’s profiles, each other’s interests and ‘dream universities’, and the admits and rejects the other had received. Some members became close friends with each other and began to interact even outside the groups. They used private WhatsApp and Facebook messages, and sometimes even voice calls to take forward certain discussions, or just chat. Aakash told me that he had become friends with a girl on the group who was applying for many of the same courses as he was. Aakash described:

I had a lot of discussion with her. We had made a pact ... if I get admit, I will tell you. If you get admit, you tell me. [...] We would tell each other, ‘It’s going to come today, don’t worry’. We would discuss our career strategies. What is the next move? If not this, then this.

Similarly, Gopal had met a boy on one of the WhatsApp groups who had a very similar profile to his own, and they had become fast friends:

He is very close to me. He regularly talks with me on the phone. He’s from Hyderabad. [...] He’s also applying for the same courses as me. We already told that if we get an admit in the same university, we should definitely go to that university. He suggested me many things. Actually, we are working together. [...] The first person who comes into my mind when I have a doubt is him. [...] In the WhatsApp groups, I heard that Scientific Instrumentation at Jena [a course both were planning to apply to] was not very good. I told him, and he said we can keep it as a back-up, if we get [admitted] to some other course, we can prefer that.

Group members living in the same city also typically organised meetups at a restaurant, cafe, or pub prior to leaving for Germany. Almost all my interlocutors had travelled to

Germany together with a group of people from their city, whom they had met through the groups. Preethi described:

So all those Bangalore people [in the ‘TU Munich Admits’ group], [we] made a separate group ... a group of people travelling from Bangalore to Munich. There were about thirteen people in this group. There were more such groups, like Delhi to Munich, Mumbai to Munich. We all travelled together, thirteen of us. [...] We were booking [tickets together] [...] We would message each other what we were packing, we would send pictures of the things we were packing, our suitcases.

For many group members, it was their first time travelling abroad, and having travel companions offered a huge sense of confidence. Often members who had become friends through the WhatsApp groups and were going to be living in the same German city would look for accommodation together. Several of my interlocutors who had been successful in getting accommodation (which was scarce in many cities) had even temporarily hosted their WhatsApp friends living in the same city till they found their own accommodation.

Conclusion

‘Study in Germany’ Facebook and WhatsApp groups have emerged as an integral part of the infrastructure mediating student mobility from India to Germany, and are meeting aspirant student migrants’ information and support needs in novel ways. Many group members credited the groups with having prevented them from making errors and sub-optimal decisions – and also with opening up new ideas and possibilities – at various stages of the application process. Very importantly, many of my interlocutors described the groups as having made their application journeys less stressful: being a member of the groups had made them feel like part of a team who could together navigate the application process successfully. ‘I felt the TU Munich group was like a collective mind’, Arif observed. ‘I have a problem, someone solves it for me. Someone else has a problem, I solve it’. Similarly, Mansi told me: ‘It was a lonely and scary road before I found the groups. And then suddenly there were 100 people always there to help me’.

Indeed, the groups were perceived as being such a good source of information and guidance that many members saw them as a viable – and even superior – alternative to education consultancies. A number of my interlocutors had decided against going to consultants because they felt they would be able to navigate the application process better with the help of the groups. A regular joke was that the groups were the ‘best consultancy in India’ with the highest rates of success in terms of admissions and visa approvals.

Although the relative unfamiliarity of Germany as a study destination might have indeed contributed to people needing the type of support available through the groups, it should be noted that such groups also exist for people interested in other destinations, including the US, where the largest number of Indians go for study. Moreover, while the Germany-focused groups were started by Indians and composed largely of Indians, there were a small number of people from other South Asian and even African countries – other ‘Global South’ countries – in the groups I studied. It appears then that it is certain demographics that experience these groups as filling an important gap in the migration infrastructure they are able to access.

Studies thus far have stressed that while social networks play a major role in mediating transnational student mobility, they also tend to reproduce privilege (Beech 2015; Brooks and Waters 2011). These studies have argued that the social networks to which a person belongs, and the social capital they possess, are closely linked to the economic and cultural capital they possess. For instance, people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to belong to transnational social networks and be embedded in cultures of international mobility – useful for organising and motivating transnational mobility – than people from higher socio-economic backgrounds. In this paper, I have shown how the ‘Study in Germany’ Facebook and WhatsApp groups give members a chance to connect meaningfully and collaborate with people outside their existing social networks, dramatically increasing their social capital and ability to successfully navigate the process of going to Germany for study. To some extent then, these groups can be seen as democratising access to study abroad.

Notes

1. Exploring the reasons behind these trends is beyond the scope of this article.
2. In this article, I use the word ‘university’ to refer to universities (Universität), technical universities (Technische Universität), and universities of applied sciences (Fachhochschule).

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